

I screen, you screen, now all scream for less screen

■ Mary Ward

Parents should set limits on their home WiFi or restrict their child's mobile phone data to address screen addiction, a study has suggested, as experts say tech companies' child controls are woefully inadequate.

An Australian-first clinical trial of treatments for smartphone and gaming addiction found parents can have some success reducing the impacts of screen use on their child's wellbeing by enforcing rules that limit internet access on their devices, rather than taking devices away.

"I'd liken it to leaving the keys to the car on the bench at home, but the car doesn't have any petrol in it," said Dr Brad Marshall, the study's lead author and head of Sydney's Screens and Gaming Disorder Clinic.

"Your kid can steal the car, but they won't get very far."

Researchers at Macquarie University and Marshall's clinic gave 689 parents instructions for five screen use strategies: setting limits on home WiFi; limiting mobile data; turning WiFi off at bedtime; drawing up daily screen use agreements; and implementing consequences such as total device bans for breaking rules.

Parents completed a questionnaire about their child's behaviour and were also asked about their household, including whether their child had failed to hand in homework due to screen use or if they had destroyed property in an argument about screen use.

Of the parents whose children met the criteria for smartphone addiction, 32 per cent of those who completed the experiment reported their children no longer were addicted. The success rate was higher, 60 per cent, among the smaller number of parents whose children had symptoms of gaming addiction.

Marshall said that due to funding constraints that meant the program was done via video, the results were



Laura Bos has set limits on her sons' usage. Photo: Simon Schluter

probably less than what could be achieved if it had been implemented in person, or with regular check-ins.

"To have this level of impact from video instructions is very encouraging," he said. "What this tells us is, if parents want to, they can have an impact on their child's use."

This month, the federal government announced plans to create a minimum age to access social media. While details are yet to be determined, it appears the laws would place the onus on social media companies to ensure users are not below the minimum age.

But Marshall said while he believed a minimum age was a step in the right direction, existing parental controls had been shown to be easily sidestepped by children

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using VPNs or secret accounts.

He said comments by Snapchat chief executive Evan Spiegel that age restrictions were unnecessary because parents can already manage their children's social media use were "out of touch".

"We should not sit and wait for these tech giants to become moral citizens," he said.

Groups of parents who have pledged to delay or restrict their

child's social media use were unsurprised that methods that cut off internet access were most successful in the trial.

"Smartphones and their associated apps are meticulously designed to be addictive and maximise time spent," said Amy Friedlander, co-founder of the Wait Mate parenting group.

"It can be challenging for adults to regulate usage, not to mention children and teens with developing brains."

Laura Bos, from Highett, is a member of one such alliance. She has implemented time restrictions on screen use for her sons, aged 11 and eight.

They can use Messenger Kids for 15 minutes a day on their computer, set up in the living room. They also

each have a set time for gaming, strictly negotiated.

"With kids, they are constantly pushing," Bos said.

"This year [my eldest] came home from school and it was all 'it's not fair that I only watch one hour of TV a day' and 'I want to play games with my friends', so that's why we started to allow the gaming after school for a set time, so he could play with his friends."

Bos said her eldest was "absolutely enraged" when he learnt he would not be getting a smartphone, but there was strength in numbers. "His friend also has a basic phone, so they use it to meet up and ride to school together. They play with each other, rather than being on the screens. Now he can really see the benefit of it."